

Nothing Like New Our Post-Apocalyptic Imagination as Utopian Desire

Most apocalyptic films are considered dystopian based on their aesthetic terms, yet many of their narratives are structured in such a way to reveal our society's larger utopian desires—particularly in terms of our future relationship with nature, the role of the individual in society, and particular ideals of community life. This article traces several dominant themes found within this genre of cinema as related to contemporary urban design solutions and recent post-disaster strategies, in order to expose what collectively we may be hoping for, as well as still fear.

Introduction

The apocalyptic trope is one of our culture's most resilient metaphors, having been part of our collective consciousness for several millennia. The idea of "the end" is no longer employed solely by the conservatively focused right, but also more recently by the environmentally prone left to equal magnitude. If one were to create a list of all apocalyptic fiction produced in modern cinema using the typical characteristics of the genre, the works gathered under this rubric would perhaps rival in quantity the most ubiquitous plot formula of all—boy-meets-girl. In fact, most recently, in films ranging from the animated feature *Wall-e* (2008) to the romantic comedy *Seeking Friend for the End of the World* (2012), the plot often is one and the same.

Typically these works are set in either one of two distinct temporal time frames related to the apocalyptic happening—either during the event itself or after the calamity has occurred. Both forms rehearse specific cultural fears as well as inherent desires—particularly in regard to future communal or urban life. As Martha Bartter writes in her work, "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal:"

Mrs. O'Leary's cow did Chicago a big favor. The earthquake of 1906 did the same for San Francisco. Once such a disaster is distanced by time, we can see how these major cities benefited by having to rebuild.... Cities get old, worn-out, dirty, dysfunctional. We long for the opportunity to clean house from top to bottom, to "make it new."¹

While most apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works are typically labeled dystopian, the plots for the majority of these are structured in such a way as to slowly reveal several contemporary utopian ideals. "The basic narrative script of an apocalypse strives to reach the ultimate closure, while at the same time opening up the space of sequentiality," argues Elana Gomel in her article, "The Plague of the Utopias." She continues:

The apocalypse is meshed in the logic of continuity. ... The end is never final. ... The equivalent of the scriptural millennium today is utopia, a total transformation of the social (and even physical) universe, some ideologically scripted brave new world, arising from the destruction of

the old. ... Millennial seduction is predicated on the relation between the horror of the closure and the pleasure of the sequel...²

There are of course a few rare exceptions, such as *On the Beach* (1956) or the classic work of Japanese anime *Akira* (1988), which conclude without any hope of surviving the ultimate ills of postmodernity. Yet, almost all other mainstream films provide a more positive narrative climax or final *dénouement* resolving some dilemma haunting that future society (and by association, our own). Regardless, the main target of destruction and regeneration is more often than not the city itself and all that it represents.

Such is the case in the recent, highly original animated short French film, *Logorama*, which won an Academy Award in 2010.³ The film's location is a future Los Angeles, where all buildings, people, and nature have been transformed into well known logos—Microsoft's butterfly, Northface's cliff, Bob's Big Boy and Mr. Clean, to name a few (Figure 1). While the *mise en scène* seems cheerful, the mood soon shifts to a very disturbing narrative in which Ronald McDonald is revealed as a psychopath on a rampage—with an arsenal of weapons. At one point he kidnaps Big Boy as well as the Esso Girl. Amid the carnage, a giant earthquake arrives—creating its own apocalyptic mayhem. In the chaos, Big Boy and Esso Girl escape. Crude oil begins to erupt across the landscape, flooding the city. The land disintegrates around the couple, until they are on an idyllic island



Figure 1. Opening scene in *Logorama* (image courtesy of Autour de Minuit).

floating away from the ruined city. There is a single tree from which Esso Girl grabs the Apple logo and takes a bite, now floating with her partner in a new utopian paradise akin to Eden itself.

Though only sixteen minutes in length, *Logorama* closely follows the broader plot adopted by many works within the larger apocalyptic genre—in which postmodern urban life self-destructs on its own terms, triggering nature's vengeful return, and allowing a selected few to survive in some form of utopian future paradise. Within this standard conflict-resolution plot line, a multitude of full-length post-apocalyptic features and anime productions popular today explore our future urban imagination in greater depth and nuance, and are worthy of closer inspection.

While the thematic range in films presenting dystopian futures is large, I intend to limit this article's scope and will deal less with blurred boundaries between human nature and technology (*Blade Runner*, 1982), our demise due to alien invasions (*War of the Worlds*, 2005), out-of-control viruses (*28 Days Later*, 2002), nuclear attack (*A Boy and His Dog*, 1975), zombies (*Dawn of the Dead*, 2004), meteors (*Deep Impact*, 1998), totalitarianism (1984, 1984), population explosion (*Soylent Green*, 1973), religious prediction (2012, 2009) or the more general aesthetics of postmodernism (*Brazil*, 1982). Instead, I will focus on post-apocalyptic narrative works that pay particular attention to our future relationship with nature. I will examine a set of desires that recur thematically within these works: the desire for a new more balanced relationship with nature; the desire for increased citizen involvement in planning decisions; and the desire for a more "tribe-like" scale for one's community. I will trace how these three desires are likewise emerging in many contemporary urban design works and post-disaster strategies globally. I will conclude by relating these desires to a set of new citizen-involved landscape projects emerging around the center of Los Angeles—the most apocalyptic of all cities.

A New Relationship to Nature

One of the central issues present in a majority of post-apocalyptic narratives is our future relationship with nature—both ecological as well as human nature.⁴ Whether in popular Asian anime features such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), or *Sky Blue* (2005), or numerous American features such as *Logan's Run* (1975), *The Road* (2009), and *Day after Tomorrow* (2004), these narratives tackle the demise of nature fairly directly within the diegetic space of the narratives. In most every case, the protagonist is forced to change his or her own traditional view of nature as threatening "other" and accept that humankind must live within nature in order to survive.

The theme of man and nature in conflict has been a dominant theme throughout the development of Western culture. As Paul Shepard has stated in *Man in the Landscape: A Historical View of the Esthetics of Nature*:

The Greeks and the Hebrews had invented the linear perspective of time. Their new historical awareness attributed to time a beginning and end, to the world a creation and a doomsday. As the Christians came to entertain this idea, finite nature was symbolic of a greater universal history. ... The belief in an immanent apocalypse could scarcely enhance any hope for a harmonious future in nature for mankind ... the division between sacred and profane was emphatic ... the landscape was enigmatic, dangerous...⁵

For Christian believers, the "saved" will at the end of time be freed from such corrupting evils of bestial nature. While a significant portion of Americans (approximately 60%) believe this scenario to be true, secular culture globally has been struggling with its own scientifically measured endgame scenario since the onset of global warming.⁶

As registered by the global C40 Cities initiative, television shows like the History Channel's *Life Without People* (2008–2010), or best selling books

like *The World Without Us* by Alan Weisman (2007), mainstream society has recently begun to accept the fact that it is not nature which is today in peril per se, but humankind itself. Scientists generally accept that "humans are not the 'goal' of evolution any more than tyrannosaurs were during their sojourn on Earth ... evolution has no goal.... The most that can be said is that during the last 350 million years natural selection has shown an inordinate fondness for beetles."⁷ Slowly it seems we have begun to understand that some form of nature will no doubt continue far into the future, regardless our own species' particular fate.

In films that depict a *more* catastrophic apocalypse, humankind is more urgently required to change its ways to survive and find peace, as seen, for example, in Hayao Miyazaki's anime classic *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). Here nature—represented by a gigantic herd of "ohmu"—return to attack humankind with a vengeance after decades of being forced to live underground due to man's toxic treatment of earth and the resulting first apocalypse many years earlier. During the second ultimate showdown between warring factions, the ohmu stampede the battlefield en masse just before one faction of humans attempt to launch a new toxic weapon against another. After the beautiful peace-seeking young protagonist is sacrificed, the humans finally understand the depth of change that must occur in order to live in balance with nature.

On the other hand, when the narrative presents a slightly *less* catastrophic scenario for humankind, we are simply told to become better stewards of the earth, rather than change our fundamental relationship with nature entirely. This is the case within films such as *Wall-e*, in which nature is allowed to return as a seedling requiring care and nourishment. Likewise in the Japanese anime feature *Tekkonkinkreet* (2006) an orphaned boy and his brother live on the streets of a future dystopian city full of vice and criminality. In contrast to the mayhem and anarchy of their environment, the boys begin caring for an apple tree seedling (Figure 2). Over the course of the story, after producing much carnage himself, the older brother



Figure 2. The seedling in *Tekkonkinkreet* (image courtesy of Sony Pictures).

eventually abandons his sociopathic ways, finally learning from his younger brother how to value life and natural beauty. Such metaphors as those represented by the seedlings in these two examples are in fact being rehearsed in many contemporary global urban landscape projects. There has not only been an explosion of urban farming as of late, but there is also a now-common aesthetic in which nature is allowed to re-inscribe itself into the urban landscape in what would be understood cinematically as a type of “return-of-the-repressed” scenario.

There have been several precedents for industrial landscapes being reclaimed by nature, including: Seattle’s Gas Work Park, completed in 1975; the conversion of a coal- and steel-production plant in Duisburg Nord, Germany into an industrial landscape park, in 1991; and the conversion of Berlin’s formally derelict Tempelhof switchyard into the Schöneberger Südgelände Nature Park, completed in 1999. Built in 2006, New York’s Highline Project pushes the post-industrial, return-of-nature aesthetic further in its direct “assault” on an icon of the industrial past (Figure 3).⁸ The project is an exquisite representation for our times, rendering nature with a relatively high degree of autonomy while still embracing our industrial past.

In contrast, many of the proposed projects included in MoMA’s 2010 *Rising Current* exhibition go even further in re-tooling the relationship between “real” nature and urban life. In particular, the Palisades Bay Team Project accepts the need for urban infrastructure not to control or exclude nature, but to allow its necessary return to the city in a more immediate and less mediated manner—acknowledging the cycle of time and change necessary to avoid multiple future calamities (Figures 4 and 5).⁹ As *New York Times* critic Nicolai Ouroussoff wrote of the work:

Its vision of “soft infrastructure,” which would replace much of the city’s aging concrete waterfront with a more porous blend of land and sea, is the most coherent model we have for a sustainable city in the current century—as



Figure 3. The Highline, New York. Chelsea Grasslands between West 19th Street and West 20th Street, looking north (photo by Iwan Baan ©2009).

well as one that would radically transform New York’s Manhattan-centric identity by reorienting the city around its harbor.¹⁰

The proposal is radical not so much for the style of the design elements themselves as for the acceptance of nature’s continued presence as something larger and more powerful than the city itself—something that is forceful enough to demand that our society move past the outdated conclusion that technology is always of the future and nature is always of the past.

An Empowered Individual in Late Modernity

While New York designers may be attending to their own future disasters through such studies, several significant apocalypse-like events have already oc-



Figure 4. Slip in Sunset Park, Brooklyn (image courtesy of Palisades Bay Team: Guy Nordenson and Associates, Catherine Seavitt Studio, Architecture Research Office).



Figure 5. Lower Manhattan Zone 0 (image courtesy of Palisades Bay Team: Guy Nordenson and Associates, Catherine Seavitt Studio, Architecture Research Office).

curred across the globe for the same reason that larger ones might eventually occur—our traditional desire to control nature. Cities such as Hiroshima, Chernobyl, New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, and Sendai have within the last half-century experienced devastating catastrophes that might initially be “blamed on nature” but were by and large exacerbated by human decisions either underestimating the extent of nature’s power or overestimating the technology used to control it.¹¹ Regardless, however, it seems our traditions continue to be knitted deeply into our built environment without any significant pause or reconsideration. As Pulitzer Prize winning cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker has noted, across the span of history societies, when threatened, are more likely to solidly cling to their cultural beliefs than to change them, even if those beliefs might lead to the culture’s own extinction.¹²

One reason for this lack of more immediate societal response might be the way in which we categorize past dangers versus future risks. As Ulrich Beck discussed within his seminal work *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, the initial apocalyptic tendencies of the past were a metaphysical response to the *under*-availability of protection against either nature or aggressive military forces. Yet, the apocalyptic urge today is due to the *over*-presences of manmade byproducts from the industrial age.¹³ As Beck states, “the risks and hazards of today thus differ in an essential way from the superficially similar ones in the Middle Ages through the global nature of their threat ... and through their *modern* causes. They are risks of modernization.”¹⁴

Beck’s work is interesting in respect to the promise of community organizing through crowdsourcing websites like Brickstarter.org and the like.¹⁵ Rather than proposing a regressive turn backwards to avoid the risks of late modernity, Beck instead

proposes that what is needed is a *reflexive* impulse bringing us to the next stage in modernity's own trajectory (a second phase of modernity so to speak)—through social engagement of a larger number of participants in the assessment and management of today's level of acceptable risk. Beck writes:

Modernization involves not just structural change, but a changing relationship between social structures and social agents. When Modernization reaches a certain level, agents tend to become more individualized, that is decreasingly constrained by structure. ... And for modernization successfully to advance, these agents must release themselves from these structures and actively shape the modernization process.¹⁶

Initially, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, modern industrial society positively promoted increased individualism, freedom, and liberal democracy. Yet, as recent postmodern critiques (think Foucault et al.) revealed, the “quasi-religious modern icon of science” in fact imposed significant controlling identities on “social actors, in the construction of risk, defining sanity, proper sexual behavior, countless other rational frames of social control.”¹⁷ In the case of the urban, that might translate into certain systematic zoning practices, the technologies employed to control nature (infrastructure) as well as people (surveillance), and so on. Beck urges instead that today's social subjects living in the age of late modernity and high communication must become more “reflective in the construction of their own biographies.”¹⁸

Many of the already mentioned post-apocalyptic media examples also represent the desire for increase in “agency” of individuals in the apocalyptic future—not only when the disaster strikes but also once “normalcy” has returned in order to move us past old models of social organizations. Whether in anime tales such as *Origins of the Past* (2006), or *Sky Blue* (2005), or in American cable TV programs such as Turner Network's *Captain Planet* (1990–1996) or NBC's more recently aired *Revolution* (2012–2013), young



Figure 6. Hybrid forums in Constitución, Chile (photos © Holcim Foundation).

protagonists are thrust into some form of leadership when the apocalypse occurs due to the limitations of previous forms of authority. They are typically teens in a liminal state between losing their innocence and gaining their own sense of power. Many are the offspring of authorities (governors, scientists, military), and are forced to sever their relationship with their families to ensure that the same mistakes and misconceptions regarding technology's benign potential and nature's control are not repeated.

How real-life apocalyptic events typically unfold is eerily similar to these fictions—particularly in regard to the spontaneous agency of ordinary people when traditional authorities fail to deal with a disaster's magnitude. As it is well known, immediately after Katrina, while leadership struggled to get ahead of the calamity's wake, a groundswell of individuals and smaller organizations (countless local citizens, Hollywood celebrities, and local church leaders) moved ahead with greater swiftness to stabilize the community, demanding at first systemic changes to several aspects of the city's physical and political structure.¹⁹

Likewise, a few years later in 2010 in Constitución, Chile, this type of increased “agency” oc-

curred to an even greater level after a devastating 8.8 earthquake and tsunami struck the region. Here, soon after the devastation, the community decided to create a new master plan in a record ninety days, for a city center with a population of fifty thousand people, or approximately a quarter million in the city proper.²⁰ The city placed a wooden structure in the middle of the city, so that gathered members of the community could debate and devise a new plan for their future city (Figure 6). A coalition of community leaders, architects, and engineers (including Rodrigo Araya of Tironi Asociados, Alejandro Gutierrez of Arup, and Alejandro Aravena of the architectural firm ELEMENTAL) worked to organize the public process and resultant plans.²¹ As Vanessa Quirk writes in the Huffington Post, “vitally, the citizens were always given priority in this process, displacing the politicians and businessmen (the funders) from their traditional place of control.”²² The very compressed timeline, as well as the use of multiple forms of communication and feedback, allowed a new plan to emerge that represented the community's desire not to repeat planning mistakes that had been made in the past.



Figure 7. New strategies for land use in Constitución, Chile (photos © Holcim Foundation).

With any of these disasters, economic realities will of course control the pace of the actual rebuilding, so what is most interesting to compare is the level of acceptable change each community was able to commit to within two years after the calamity. In the case of New Orleans, while there was still significant community participation two years following Katrina, official responses to the disaster indicate just how hard change can be. As outlined by Michael Grunwald in his 2007 *Time* exposé “The Threatening Storm,” written two years after the disaster, the city by and large lacked the political leadership needed to make the necessary 180-degree turn to keep New Orleans safe. And so four years after the storm, as reported in *The New York Times* in 2009, “the idea of adjusting the city’s footprint in any way became politically toxic, and Mayor C. Ray Nagin quickly made it clear that the city’s redevelopment would be left in the hands of private interest.”²³ In order to plan for anything more progressive and more environmentally responsive, “a range of government agencies would need to work together to come up with a more coordinated plan,” and a significant reimagining of the division between public and private interests would need to occur as well.²⁴

In contrast to the level of progress in New Orleans, the community of Constitución, Chile employed a robust reflective learning process—recognizing, as

Beck’s work suggests, “the conditions underpinning the scientific conclusions, drawn out the social situational questions which they implied, and examined these with the benefit *inter alia* of the different forms of knowledge held by people other than scientists.”²⁵ Their reflexive learning caused appropriate “negotiation between different epistemologies and sub-cultural forms.”²⁶ As can be seen in the documentary *Mauchos* (2011), on the rebuilding process, the conversations “entailed the development of the social and moral identities of the actors involved.”²⁷

As discussed in a conversation between Brickstarter.org blogger Dan Hill and Rodrigo Araya of Tironi Asociados, Araya had been in a sense “practicing” various methods of community input prior to the quake. Studying Bruno Latour and Michel Callon’s *Acting in an Uncertain World*, he had sought ways to use Latour and Callon’s “hybrid forum” ideas in other projects.²⁸ When the earthquake hit, he saw an opportunity to use some of these techniques and concepts directly. In the final plans, unlike in those for New Orleans, the redistribution of the built city was quite radical—with parks re-purposing the vast majority of areas of the city where houses and businesses were wiped away by the tsunami (Figure 7).

One conclusion that this comparison might offer is that the citizens of New Orleans have so long

lived under the threat of a flood, and are so highly dependent on both disassociated authorities (federal and state) as well as significant technology, that this context was simply too substantial to navigate, contributing to some extent to the limits of their ability to move things forward. Whereas the population of Constitución lived under a periodic threat of disaster, the community of New Orleans with its constant need to hold back nature had become resigned to the status quo.

In her work “Afterglow: Chernobyl and the Everyday,” Ursula K. Heise states:

The question of how an awareness of environmental deterioration and technological risk can become part of everyday life without leading to apocalyptic despair, reluctant resignation to a new state of normalcy or bored indifference has become an urgent issue for environmentalists and eco-critics.²⁹

People have so long lived in the shadow of a future disaster that they don’t live in fear as much as “dwell in crisis,” writes Heise. “They live with an awareness that certain limits in the exploitation of nature have already been exceeded, that past warnings were not heeded, and that slowly risk scenarios surround them on a daily basis.”⁶² In a similar vein, Beck writes, “in advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks.... Risk society is catastrophic society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm.”³⁰

An Improved Sense of Community

In his latest work, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Pulitzer Prize winning evolutionary biologist and Harvard professor emeritus E. O. Wilson discusses in broad terms the biological origins of our species’ particular form of “eusociality”—the critical characteristic for some species to organize in groups “containing multiple generations and prone to perform altruistic acts.”³¹ Our own form of eusociality has allowed us to attain its current position as the dominant species on the

planet. Wilson argues that this attribute occurs once a species defines—both physically and conceptually—a “defensible” nest or proverbial “campsite”—requiring sharing of resources, social intelligence, bonding, competition for status, and empathy.³²

Such is the context in which to examine one of the more complex tropes common to apocalyptic narratives: the apocalypse as an opportunity for a final showdown between opposing worldviews. As Mathew Gross and Mel Gilles have stated in their recently published book *The Last Myth: What the Rise in Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America*:

The purpose of the anticipated apocalyptic moment is to vindicate one’s beliefs. The apocalyptic moment resolves with finality the tensions between good and evil, between believer and non-believer, between environmentalist and capitalist—and the holder of the apocalyptic vision invariably comes out on top.³³

This, it seems, is the primary motivator for the use of the apocalyptic metaphor on both the right and the left over the past several decades. In our global age, as we reach the seven billion mark in population, there is general systemic anxiety regarding our ability to share resources and to move beyond our tribalist instincts.

Following the formal logic of standard narrative resolution, mainstream apocalyptic narratives more often than not promote utopian endings—such as in the Korean anime film *Sky Blue* which “resolves” the extreme division of haves and have-nots, freeing the class of people forced to work outside of the city in a wasteland to support those living inside in an artificial world. Or, more recently, in James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), which “resolves” the battle between primitive and advanced cultures. Yet in some narratives—typically using “aliens” as a stand-in for the “other”—such naive resolutions are not delivered. Historically, we should be aware that the apocalyptic metaphor has often subtly promoted the idea of “cleansing”—separating the damned and the saved.

Examining “the general narrativity of conta-

gions” as they related to apocalyptic plots—both real and fictional—Elana Gomel traces the plague or global disease metaphor as it emerged strategically in works ranging from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to that of Camus’s *The Plague*.³⁴ She writes:

The apocalyptic desire that finds satisfaction in elaboration fictions of the End is double edged. On the one hand, its ultimate object is some version of the crystalline New Jerusalem, an image of purity.... On the other hand, apocalyptic fictions typically linger on pain and suffering. The end result of apocalyptic purification often seems of less importance than the narrative pleasure derived from the bizarre and opulent tribulation of the bodies being burnt by fire and brimstone...³⁵

Most popular media today that employ the apocalyptic do not endorse, of course, the overt message of cultural genocide. Instead, they tend to problematically explore milder forms of exclusion, potential reduction of population, a unity through homogenization, or the return of the small-scale community or family.

Examining various works of science fiction, Bartter notes that these authors tend to “blame” the wars on the mega-nation-state and the cities that they support, with these authors setting “out to show its destruction, embodied in the death of cities, as the salvation of humanity. Each ends his grim warning with reassurance: the survival of a simpler culture with a purer ethic ... proves the pragmatic virtue of the return to origins.”³⁶ She continues:

Our fiction shows that an ideal world would consist of small, self-supporting communities, full of people “just like us.” ... These people would have the resources and the freedom to engage in science, technology, and the arts, while living simply but comfortably, in groups small enough for everyone to know everyone else.... Ideal communities, we somehow believe, could exist if only our world were renewed as a better (less urban, mechanized, depersonalized) place.³⁷

Citing Sodom and Gomorrah, she argues that cities are associated with sin by their very existence. “For us, the underground ‘shelters’ that simultaneously protect and confine the fictional survivors ... are necessary only because the city itself exists. The city is both womb and tomb.”³⁸ While most fictional accounts of apocalyptic destruction focus their wrath at urban centers, a select group was always shown to survive. Bartter concludes: “This group, purified through the sacrifice of a large percentage of its members (and perhaps by a return to primitive conditions), might eventually be able to build a new, infinitely better world. Thus, atomic war has traditionally been presented both as obvious disaster and as secret salvation.”³⁹ While Bartter accepts that this metaphor is often secondary or even overlooked by the narrative’s authors, it nonetheless “powerfully influences our cultural subconscious,” when viewed in multiple narratives.⁴⁰

Thus, these narratives register a continued utopian desire for our culture to return to some sort of primary/traditional eusocial unit—one that is conveniently scaled after the apocalypse to the size which offers all the benefits of evolutionary diversity, but which does not diminish the contributions and identities of the individual. While some utopian metaphors in fiction can be read as impulses towards hope, others are clearly reactions from fear.

To Live or Die in LA

Just at the time when Facebook has emerged as a high-tech strategy to establish some form of social identity for our new global village, there seems to be a decisive split in our collective consciousness on where to go from here. On one hand, we are intrigued by new means of globally connecting our disparate groups through communication technologies like the World Wide Web, Four Square, Twitter, et al. Yet, on the other hand, we are also deeply fearful of the homogenizing effect of these technologies. As such, we fantasize through our post-apocalyptic narratives about certain radical changes in past traditions—such as establishing a new less-totalizing relationship to nature, or increasing the role of the individual in late-modern culture—



Figure 8. Map showing recent “Return of Nature” projects around downtown Los Angeles (image courtesy of author).

while we also telegraph our fears of the radical “scaling up” of our current sense of community.

Many environmentalists not only fear that we might become fatigued or resigned if the apocalyptic message continues to be broadcast everywhere, but also that, if taken literally as a type of utopian day dream, it might allow us all an excuse to do nothing. Even the anti-environmental message in fundamentalism—proclaiming that the meek will inherit the earth—suggests little impetus to treat the earth with any lasting respect.⁴¹

Ironically, though, in Los Angeles—a place where few would look for thriving counter-arguments to resignation—there have recently emerged not one but over a half-dozen new projects in which citizens, designers, and authorities have worked together to reimagine denatured sites in various enclaves surrounding downtown (Figure 8). These projects include both already completed projects such as the Augustus F. Hawkins Nature Park (2000, Santa Monica Mountain Conservancy with local government), the Bimini Slough Ecology Park (2004, North East Trees, Bresee Foundation, Los Angeles Eco-Village), the Leo Politi Elementary School (2008, Los Angeles Audubon, US Fish and Wildlife, citizens), the Vista Hermosa Natural Park (2008, Mia Lehrer + Associates, KPFF Consulting Engineers, ERW Design, Sweeney and Associates, Ciaran O’Halloran), the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County–North Campus (2012, Mia Lehrer + Associates, CO Architects, Pace, Wallace Laboratories, Stephen Mayo, Green Shield Ecology, Inc.), the South Los Angeles Wetland Park (2012, City of Los Angeles), as well as several larger scale projects that are



Figure 9. South Los Angeles Wetland Park—a former MTA bus depot transformed into a storm water cleaning wetlands (image courtesy of author).

currently moving ahead slowly such as the LA River Revitalization Master Plan (Mia Lehrer and Associates, Tetra Tech, Inc. Civitas, Inc, Wenk Associates, HNTB Architecture, Inc), the Los Angeles Historic State Park (Hargreaves Associates, Michael Maltzan Architecture) and most recently, the 6th Street Viaduct Replacement Project (HNTB, Michael Maltzan Architecture, AC Martin and Associates). These projects have been accumulating slowly and persistently in areas that might be considered readymade sets for countless postmodern apocalyptic movies from *Escape from Los Angeles* (1996) to *Meteor Apocalypse* (2010)—landscapes which illustrate Fredric Jameson’s well-known quip that “postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”⁴²

Each of these landscapes distinguishes itself from the traditional park, but with differing methods. One approach is to use the landscape to cleanse and repair itself from industrial toxicity. This is the case with the South Los Angeles Wetlands Park, built on the site of a former MTA bus yard in South Central. The site now includes a storm water pre-treatment wetland of approximately nine acres designed to reduce the amount of pollutants such as bacteria, oil, grease, gasoline, suspended sediments, and heavy metals from reaching receiving waters flowing to the

ocean. In other cases the landscape is used to involve and educate, as in the Leo Politi Elementary School, which, in an area where there are 25,352 people per square mile, paired up with the Los Angeles Audubon Society to create a habitat supporting numerous species of birds, insects, and plants, helping raise standardized test scores in three years from 9% to 53% grade level proficiency and above. In other cases, the landscape simply allows the return of nature, rather than driving it underground. In the Bimini Slough Ecology Park, for example, a natural stream near Koreatown called the Arroyo de la Sacatela has been daylighted after being contained in underground drain pipes since the mid-twentieth century.⁴³

In striking contrast to the relentlessly static imagery of dystopic abandonment that still surrounds them, these projects have returned not only a bit of urban nature to the center’s margins but a type of local seasonal temporality not allowed for in the undifferentiated everyday landscape of industrial urban life at large (Figure 9).

Los Angeles itself is just one of 88 incorporated cities within its county. Unlike cities such as Chicago, New York, Houston, Portland, and Baltimore, which have more organized approaches to supporting nature’s reincorporation, Los Angeles’s progress is more often than not made from the bottom up. Individual



Figure 10. North Campus, Natural History Museum of LA County (image courtesy of Mia Lehrer and Associates).

citizen groups and their leaders need to work alone to make progress, acting much like the tribal groups of post-apocalyptic narratives. While, on one hand, it may seem like each project on its own is nothing more than the hopeless seedling in *Tekkonkinkreet*, there are enough of them now that people might start to take notice.

Like an army on the offensive, these projects encircle the traditional high-finance power center of downtown proper. Located not in the affluent areas of the city where sustainability typically means sustaining a culture of slightly less excess, these projects are in neighborhoods with inhabitants who are under tremendous daily strain. In contrast to the new landscape projects being built in downtown Los Angeles—such as the recently refurbished Civic Mall and Pershing Square, which continue to use plants as design elements—these more radical infrastructural projects try to expose nature’s own independent values and pleasures. While this essay is not the right opportunity to do so, there is much to say about the relationship

between new urban citizen-science movements and the larger reconsideration of the value of scientific knowledge in refereeing the battle between ecological balance and continued industrial progress (Figure 10).

Abandoned by industry as well as the utopian planning politics of the early twentieth century, these spaces have been identified by their communities for hosting nature’s return. This is analogous to the way marginalized citizens in many post-apocalyptic narratives are provided an opportunity to re-engage in deciding their own fate. Their designs often register the three “desires” discussed above: the desire for a new relationship to nature, the desire for individual citizen-subjects to proactively embody modernity’s broadest promise of empowerment, and the desire to rehearse the idea of the tribe in the most positive nonexclusionary sense of being invested in one’s own territory. As author Nic Clear writes, in his introductory essay to *Architectures of the Near Future*, such current economic realities of urban life, if appreciated, can offer “great potential for develop-

ing a new agenda in architecture” and “can help us understand why we are doing the things we do.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

While, historically, the scientific revolution quelled the use of the apocalyptic metaphor by providing us with a new metaphor—that of unending progress—we now have discovered that the terms of unfettered progress itself have brought us to a new precipice of potential self-destruction. For Gross and Gilles, “the deeper we entangle the challenges of the twenty-first century with apocalyptic fantasy, the more likely we are to paralyze ourselves with inaction—or with the wrong course of action.”⁴⁵ By reacting to the *idea* of the apocalypse, rather than with the underlying problems, most people will “party, pray or prepare” rather than change their actions.⁴⁶ Yet, as discussed, our popular fictional narratives suggest we are ready for a more advanced conversation regarding nature and individual agency, and even to explore means to better define our communities.

Presently, our largest crisis is a crisis in how to conceptualize time.⁴⁷ With so many institutions today simultaneously dwelling on the inevitability of “the end” as a rhetorical device to create a sense of crisis, we may be creating a situation in which we fulfill our own prophecies rather than avoiding them. Our religious institutions refuse to update their own at times literal eschatological narrative. And most of our scientific institutions are glacially slow in rewriting their own mythological presumptions regarding the inevitable benign benefits from all forms of technological progress.

Gross and Gilles interestingly note that “the last time apocalyptic anxiety spilled into the mainstream to the extent that it altered the course of history—during the Reformation—it relied on a revolutionary new communications technology: the printing press.”⁴⁸ With our own revolutions in communication today, this may account for some portion of the trope’s resurgence. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, people often look towards our creative cultural output in literature, cinema, and architecture as a place to practice and explore new ways to approach

living collectively and within nature. As Nic Clear writes, “architects nearly always assume that this future will be ‘better’ than the present, often as a consequence of what is being proposed. Architecture is, by its very nature, utopian.”⁴⁹

Many historians have noted that systemic shifts in our own concepts of time and space often follow new inventions of communication.⁵⁰ Perhaps, as these changes continue to occur within this early part of the twenty-first century, they will be significant enough to somehow move us beyond the current apocalyptic endgame we continue to imagine. Positive things can in fact come from our numerous smaller catastrophes, both in fiction and in reality, as horrific as they always are. Just as the Enlightenment followed the Plague, by proleptically rehearsing the future in the present we might learn enough about ourselves to avoid any ultimate calamity altogether.⁵¹

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Notes

1. Martha Bartter, “Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal,” *Science Fiction Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986): 148.
2. Elana Gomel, “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 1 (2001): 407–408.
3. See: *Logorama*, released February 19, 2010 (USA), produced by Autour de Minuit, directors François Alaux, Hervé de Crécy, Ludovic Houplain, <http://vimeo.com/10149605> (accessed June 2012).
4. Limited portions of this section are covered in more detail in my article “Future Traditions of Nature,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 7–19.
5. Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historical View of the Esthetics of Nature* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1967), 221.
6. Mathew B. Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), 10.
7. Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Goffelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 22.
8. Design Credits: Seattle’s Gas Work Park (1975)—Richard Haag Associates; Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord (1991)—Latz + Partner (Peter Latz); Schöneberger Südgelände Nature Park (1999)—Grün Berlin

GMBH ; Highline Park (2006)—James Corner of Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, planting design by Piet Oudolf and engineering by Buro Happold.

9. Rising Currents Exhibition (2010)—MoMA and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center), chief curator Barry Bergdoll, The show consisted of individual proposals from five interdisciplinary teams, including as discussed here the work of Palisade Bay Team, lead by Guy Nordenson and Associates, Catherine Seavitt Studio, Architecture Research Office.
10. Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Imagine a More Watery New York,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/26/arts/design/26rising.html?_r=0.
11. Limited portions of this section were developed for presentation at the ACSA’s 2012 International Conference in Barcelona.
12. Gross and Gilles, *The Last Myth* (note 6), 173.
13. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, translated by Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), 21.
14. Ibid.
15. See Brickstarter, <http://brickstarter.org/> (accessed July 2012).
16. Beck (note 13), 2.
17. Ibid., 3.
18. Ibid.
19. As discussed by Thomas J. Campanella in *Recovering New Orleans*, <http://www.planetizen.com/node/17448>. Campanella is the co-editor of the related book *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover From Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
20. See <http://www.citypopulation.de/Chile-Cities.html> and <http://www.holcimfoundation.org/T1359/A11LAsiCL.html> (accessed July 2012).
21. See <http://www.presconstitucion.cl/proyectos/> or as also shown in depth at <http://www.holcimfoundation.org/T1359/A11LAsiCL.html> (accessed July 2012).
22. Vanessa Quirk, *Can You Crowdfund a City?*, <http://www.archdaily.com/233194/can-you-crowdfund-a-city/> (accessed July 2012).
23. Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Reinventing America’s Cities: The Time Is Now,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/29/arts/design/29ouro.html?pagewanted=all>.
24. Ibid.
25. Scott Lash and Brian Wayne, introduction to Beck, *Risk Society* (note 13), 5.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Michel Callon and Yannik Barthe, *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, translated by Graham Burchell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
29. Ursula Heise, “Afterglow: Chernobyl and the Everyday,” in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, edited by Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 181.
30. Beck (note 13), 24.
31. E. O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 16.
32. Ibid., 43.
33. Gross and Gilles (note 6), 14.
34. Gomel (note 2), 406.
35. Ibid., 405.

36. Bartter (note 1), 152.

37. Ibid., 150.

38. Ibid., 148.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/20/rick-santorum-obama-religion-_n_1288680.html (accessed July 2012); also see Gary Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 107.

42. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

43. For South LA Wetlands Park, see <http://inhabitat.com/nine-acre-l-a-parking-lot-transformed-into-a-pollution-reducing-wetland/>; for Leo Politi Elementary, see <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/16/local/la-me-bird-school-20120416>; for Bimini Slough, see <http://lacreekfreak.wordpress.com/2010/01/19/places-to-visit-bimini-slough-ecology-park/> (accessed April 2013).

44. Nic Clear, “Architecture of the Near Future,” *Architectural Design* 79, no. 5 (2009): 9.

45. Gross and Gilles (note 6), 200.

46. Ibid.

47. See the author’s chapter entitled “New Orleans, Nature and the Apocalyptic Trope,” in *Reconstructing New Orleans*, edited by Carol McMichael Reese, Michael Sorkin, and Anthony Fontenot (New York: Verso Press), forthcoming Spring 2014.

48. Gross and Gilles (note 6), 124.

49. Clear (note 44), 6.

50. Gross and Gilles (note 6), 200; Wilson (note 31), 293.

51. Gross and Gilles (note 6), 129.